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Review of Massimiliano Trentin, Engineers of Modern Development. East German Experts in Ba'thist Syria: 1965-1972 (Padova: CEUP, 2010)

Citation for published version:

Pierret, T 2012, 'Review of Massimiliano Trentin, Engineers of Modern Development. East German Experts in Ba'thist Syria: 1965-1972 (Padova: CEUP, 2010)', *Syrian Studies Association Newsletter*, vol. 17, no. 1. <<https://ojcs.siu.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/viewFile/2743/709>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Syrian Studies Association Newsletter

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Book Review:

Massimiliano Trentin, *Engineers of Modern Development. East German Experts in Ba'athist Syria: 1965-1972*. Padova: CEUP, 2010.

Thomas Pierret

In *Engineers of Modern Development*, historian Massimiliano Trentin uses East German archives to write the history of a group of experts (*Regierungsberater*) dispatched by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) between 1965 and 1972 to assist socialist reforms in Syria. During the second half of the 1960s, indeed, Syrian politics was dominated by the radical “Neo-Ba’thists” of Salah Jadid, under which the country established a privileged relationship with the communist block while following a “Non Capitalist Road to Development”.

Because of the nature of the main archival sources used by the author, *Engineers of Modern Development* addresses two different issues, that is, Syrian-East German diplomatic relations, and institution-building inside Syria. As far as diplomacy is concerned, the book reminds us that things were not as easy as ideological proximity between the two countries might suggest. Like other Third World countries, Syria was playing on the rivalry between East and West Germany, to the extent that, surprisingly enough for readers unfamiliar with the topic, Damascus did not grant formal diplomatic recognition to the GDR until 1969, that is, four years after the first visit of East German experts to Syria. Another problem was that Berlin was torn between its privileged relationship with the leftist wing of the Syrian regime, which was the closest to communist conceptions of economic development, and its preference for the realistic approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict that was advocated by Hafiz al-Asad’s “reactionary” faction. After the latter’s coup in 1970, however, the *Détente* facilitated the new president’s drive to resume relations with the West at the expense of Damascus’ previous policy of exclusive partnership with Communist countries. This reorientation of Syrian diplomacy, combined with the regime’s policy of economic *infitah* (“opening”) and the resulting drift away from socialism, led to the non-renewal of the East German mission in the country.

Although the main purpose of East German consultancy in Syria was economic, it also had political relevance because of its role in the process of state-building. Indeed, socialist transformation of the economy required the setting up of strong, centralized state institutions able to get the upper hand over the private sector and manage economic planning. Therefore, East German experts did not only influence the reorganization of nationalized enterprises, but also left their mark on economy-related ministries, the Council of Ministers, and local authorities.

Overall, however, the story of East German expertise in Syria was that of a failure. Even before al-Asad’s rightist turn, the mission suffered from the factionalism of the Syrian political elite (in particular the so-called “power dualism” resulting from the rivalry between the left-wing and right-wing of the Ba’th) as well as from deeper issues that would mar Syrian politics up to this day, that is, the many weaknesses of the regime but also of the state itself. The Ba’th had to make up for its lack of legitimacy by resorting to coercion, and state institutions were never able to exert the level of control over the economy that was required by the regime’s socialist ambitions.

Engineers of Development provides an interesting insight into a crucial period of modern Syrian history. It is the first publication on Syrian-East German relations and one of the few in-depth studies of the relations between Syria and communist countries during the Cold War. However, the book is somewhat disappointing in several respects. First, it says much more about the diplomatic and political context of the East German mission than about the latter’s actual achievements. For the most part, the role of the

mission in the reform of Syrian institutions is dealt with in only twenty-two pages (105 to 127). The topic probably deserved a longer, and more detailed account. A second issue is that although East German archives provide a unique viewpoint to revise our knowledge of the Ba‘thist state during the period under scrutiny, it is difficult to assess to which extent the book actually does that because it engages very little with the existing literature. Strikingly, the bibliography does not include two of the finest works ever published about the first decade of the Ba‘thist era, namely, Itamar Rabinovich’s *Syria Under the Ba‘th, 1963-66* (1972), and Steven Heydemann’s *Authoritarianism in Syria* (1999). At a more formal level, the book also suffers from grammatical errors in the transliteration of Arabic terms (on p. 113, “*al-isdiwaḡiyya al-sultah*” instead of “*isdiwaḡiyya al-sultah*”) and inaccurate uses of the article “al” (p. 113, “al-Hafiz al-Asad”; p. 139, “the al infitah”).

Thomas Pierret is Lecturer in Contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of Baas et Islam en Syrie. La dynastie Assad face aux oulémas. Paris: PUF, 2010.